

Monster Meat

She threw her arm up in front of her face and it hit claws.

The thing standing where Constance the nice pig should have been roared. Before Willow could un-freeze, a tug on her arm pulled her out of claw's reach.

She ran, pulled along by Wilson until she recovered herself, outpaced him and began to pull him along behind her. His torch went out. She pulled out her lighter. By dawn, her legs were sore and he had become a stumbling dead weight, they had come to an open space, she let go, they collapsed in the grass.

"Where did Constance go?" she gasped.

Wilson was heaving for breath, eyes glassy, clutching a stitch in his side. Oh dear, after a little run like that? He was going to have some trouble out here. He had made it as far as he needed to go, at least, and he had not once complained or told her he needed to stop.

When he was able to form words: "The blue meat changes them."

"But she was a nice pig!"

"Not anymore."

Willow stared up into the pale morning sky. It looked like rain. She hated rain.

Wilson was looking down at her. He took off his backpack and pulled out a wad of something.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"You're hurt!" She realized her arm was bleeding, badly enough that it shouldn't be left to its own devices. "Yikes. Thanks."

He nodded and carefully wrapped her wound with strips of honey-coated papyrus. Gross and sticky, but they usually seemed to work. Afterwards, he stepped away and she got to her feet.

"Where are we?" she wondered aloud.

He studied their surroundings- open grassland ringed sparsely with trees. "I don't know, but maybe we should stay away from that pig village."

"It was that nasty blue meat?"

He nodded. "I saw a group kill some spiders, eat the meat and transform. I was coming to warn you but it was too late."

"Sheesh!" She put her hands on her hips. "That blue meat's even too gross for pigs!" She sighed. "We might as well look around here."

There were meadows nearby with berry bushes for the picking. Rain began to fall, but it was light and short-lived. There was no sign of spiders, bones, skeletons, or anything that didn't belong in the woods.

Willow trusted normal surroundings least of all.

Around noon she made a fire. Maybe they didn't really need one right that minute but she was hungry, she wanted to cook her berries, and she really wanted a fire. There would be plenty of

materials left for that night's fire anyway, and there were more nearby to gather.

Wilson sat down across from her, on the other side of the fire. His eyes were darting, making him look like a little kid that had stolen something. He was holding blue meat.

"Ee-yuck!" Willow proclaimed. "I don't even want to look at that stuff!"

Wilson held up a hand. "Those transformed pigs were nearly invincible, weren't they?"

Willow's eyebrows rose. He couldn't be...

He continued in a defensive tone as he began to pick hairs off the meat. "What if it can make us stronger?"

"Wilson, that stuff is nasty! Don't eat it. Have some nice berries."

He eyed the berries, but shook his head. "I have to try it! What if this meat can bestow powers?" He raised it in front of his face and peered at it.

Powers, huh? "What if it just makes you sick?"

"Then I'll stop the experiment." He began to heat the meat. It smelled like lamp oil.

Willow shook her head and ate her berries. "Didn't those pigs go crazy, too?"

"They're beast-men, Willow. You and I have control of ourselves."

"Speak for yourself! I'm not eating that stuff." She checked her food supplies. Berries, carrots, and one half-starved bunny. Their cooking pot was back on the other side of the pig village, at least a day's walk away. "Should we wait for tomorrow to head back? I don't think we can make it before dark."

"Are we going back?" he said.

She stretched. "I don't know, are we? Or are we just going to jump into the ocean and hope we float somewhere good?"

He blinked at her.

"What else are we going to do?" she asked him.

"There has to be some way out of here."

Willow laced her fingers together and studied them. "Yeah. Yeah, we can't let that mean old man coop us up here forever. That wouldn't be fair at all."

Wilson nodded and began to chew on his blue meat. He pulled a face.

"No one's making you eat that," she said.

"This is for science." He took another bite and flinched.

"Sure."

He became quiet. She nibbled her berries.

Had she heard something?

Willow became very still. She sifted through the surrounding noises. The crackles of her fire. Wilson's chewing noises. A distant bird...

The dry, light noise of an ax blade on wood.

Willow slowly got to her feet. Her heart thumped in her ears.

Wilson looked up at her, tilting his head. She put her finger to her lips and headed in the direction of the sound. Trees became thicker around her as she moved.

Through the trees, she saw her. A human being. An elderly woman, wreathed in flowers, chopping a tree. She was wrinkled and there was a little bit of fuzz under her nose and on her jutting chin. Coarse gray hair was trying to escape from her too-tight bun.

She was the most beautiful woman Willow had ever seen.

"Hey!" She waved.

The woman turned on her heel, raising her ax. She saw Willow, looked at Willow's face, and lowered the ax. "Greetings!" She drew closer. "How delightful to encounter you! I had begun to think I was the only living person on this island, although I have seen the remains of others. What is your name?"

"I'm Willow!"

"Please call me Wickerbottom." She offered a hand, and Willow shook it. It was dry and warm and old. Willow was so happy to see a new person that she didn't even giggle at her silly name. Not even a little bit. Not even on the inside.

Wickerbottom eyed Willow's messy hair and torn skirt. "I don't suppose you have a town here to reside in."

"Nope! Just wandering around lost, like you."

"In that instance, I suppose..." Wickerbottom trailed off and peered over her glasses at something behind Willow. Willow looked

over her shoulder. Wilson had wandered over to see what was going on... scruffy, beardy Wilson with smears of blue gunk by his mouth and dried grass wrapped around his torso as a sort of useless makeshift armor.

"This is my friend," Willow explained.

Wickerbottom was a librarian and a writer. She had been on the island for about three days and had set up a nice camp. She was happy to have visitors.

"You have a science machine!" Wilson said, as soon as he saw it.

"Indeed," Wickerbottom said.

"You have a fire pit!" Willow said.

"Indeed." Wickerbottom folded her hands together. "One needs a sense of normalcy. Please, make yourselves at home."

Willow threw a few pine cones into the fire pit. Wilson started messing with the machine.

"How long have you been out here?" Wickerbottom asked.

Wilson was usually slow to speak up when someone asked him a question so Willow answered first. "I got dropped here two weeks ago. Three days later, I found Wilson." She wondered if Wickerbottom would ask what Willow had been doing or where she was from before she'd gotten to the island. Wilson had never asked that, bless his distracted, self-centered heart.

"I see," Wickerbottom said. "And from whence did you come before?"

Oh no, Willow shouldn't have answered first. She didn't know what to say...

Just then, Wilson butted in as if he hadn't even noticed Willow was talking. She breathed an inner sigh of relief. Thank goodness for clueless men. "I am a gentleman scientist," he announced. "I was working near Boston."

"Ah," Wickerbottom said. "I thought I detected a hint of the New World in your manner of speaking."

"You're not a Brit?" Willow had never asked where Wilson was from.

"No, although I went to school there," he said, finally leaving the science machine alone and coming over to the group. "My father was English."

"A man of science, you say," Wickerbottom mused. "Which field of study?"

Wilson hunched his shoulders. "Er, generally... several sciences."

"Was there a specific project you were working on before your disappearance? I have always enjoyed discussions of the acquisition of knowledge."

Was it just Willow's imagination or were the tops of his ears getting pink? "Nothing a layperson would understand," he said.

Wickerbottom peered at him. "Young man, I'm hardly a layperson. I've been following all of the relevant journals since their inception."

"Which field of study?" he countered.

"All of them."

"Ah." It wasn't Willow's imagination- Wilson was becoming decidedly uncomfortable. So Willow pretended a very silly thing. She pretended she had slipped and burned her finger.

"Owie!" Both of them turned and stared at her. "Wow, gosh! I am sooo clumsy!" Willow chirped. She put her 'burned' finger in her mouth so she wouldn't laugh.

Wilson turned away, not asking if she was okay. "What were we talking about? Oh! I came here about a month ago."

"My dear, do you need to treat that?" Wickerbottom asked.

"Nah! It's fine," Willow said.

Wickerbottom nodded and looked at Wilson. "Forgive me if I'm being impertinent, but I believe I can see how a makeshift razor could be constructed." She eyed his beard. "You seem to be having difficulty not tripping on it."

"I could be persuaded to shave this," said Wilson, whose beard had nearly caught fire several times in the past week. Willow had not been involved. Unlike Wilson, she knew how to handle a fire.

They helped Wickerbottom gather supplies until nightfall.

"I have some more healthful fare available," Wickerbottom pointed out as Wilson took out a chunk of blue meat.

Willow rolled her eyes. "He's doing an experiment."

"Ah! So you're the sort to use himself as a test subject," Wickerbottom said.

Wilson wiped his left hand on his pants. "I'm always cautious."

Willow had never seen him without a beard before. He was really pale, like cheese curds, and his chin was really pointy. And his mouth was very expressive... and usually pouting. He reminded her a lot of a younger kid she used to look after back home, a long time ago... he was small, and bigger kids used to pick on him, and the grown-ups usually didn't see. So then Willow would kick butts, and get caught, and get punished.

"It seems like there's not much food left around here," Wilson said.

"That is correct," Wickerbottom said. "Unfortunately, a chance lightning strike cleared out the berry bushes I was relying on. I was planning to venture forth."

"We were going to explore too, weren't we, Wilson?" Willow said. "There's gotta be a way out of here. Maybe we can find that mean old Maxwell."

"And hurt him," said Wilson, who had finished his gross meat and looked a little green.

The next day they set out. Wilson was quiet. He was often quiet, but this was a different, surlier silence. The little dummy had probably made himself sick and didn't want to admit it. She gave him his space.

On the third day of the meat experiment, she touched his arm and he flinched away, hissing at her.

"No more blue meat," she said.

He scowled and blinked at her. He began rubbing the backs of his arms. "I..."

"No more blue meat," she repeated.

He sighed. "All right. I don't think it's working."

She'd tried to warn him.

They camped at the edge of a stinky muddy area at dusk, deciding to explore it in full sunlight.

"Come on," Willow said, holding out some berries. "You have to eat something that's not gross."

Wilson shook his head. He was sitting all bunched up. "I'm not hungry."

Wickerbottom turned her head. "Do you hear something?"

Willow looked out over the expanse of nasty wet mud. Something was running around out there. "It's one of those fish guys," she said. They weren't friendly.

Wickerbottom cupped her hand around her ear. "I hear a human voice. He sounds alarmed."

Willow got to her feet. "Well, I guess we'd better go look then!"

A big man in a unitard was running around in the mud. "Help! Young girl needs help!" he cried.

A little girl was lying on her back in the mud, staring up into the sky. A red flower was placed over her hands, folded neatly on her chest. She looked still and calm.

Willow's jaw dropped.

Wickerbottom stepped closer. "Hello! We may be able to provide some assistance."

The man turned. "Peoples! I am happy!" He pointed to the girl. "Save young girl!"

"I don't see a thing wrong with her," Wilson muttered.

"I am imprisoned," the girl said tonelessly.

"Giant bad thing is keeping her trapped," the man said. "See!"

He approached her, and a giant purple *thing* snapped up out of the dirt and began whipping at the air above the girl's head.

"I fear if I move I may be flattened," the girl said.

The thing vanished back underneath the earth. Willow recovered herself and said: "He can't reach the ground! Try crawling away."

"Unfortunately," she said, "it can indeed reach the ground once one is far enough away from the root. My leg is injured, and I cannot crawl fast enough to escape the lashing spikes."

"Oh dear," Wickerbottom said. "And so young."

"It is here that death will find me at last," the girl said.

"You're not gonna die," Willow dismissed. She turned to the others. "How much rope do we have?"

Wilson checked his backpack. "Enough." He took the rope out and started tying ends together.

Willow explained, since the large man looked confused: "We'll throw her the rope and then pull her out fast before those nasty spikes can get her."

"I will do pulling," the strange man said. "I am mighty!"

Wilson tossed him one end of the rope.

"Let me," Willow said, taking the other end. She ran up to the little girl.

"Willow, wait!"

Too late! She dropped the end of the rope by the little girl and turned, dodging the tentacle, slipping, falling face first in the mud, feeling something lash the back of her legs. Oops.

"Oh no no no," she heard.

She crawled forward and got to her feet, now out of harm's reach. "I'm fine," she said. "Yech! I hate mud."

The big man pulled on the rope and the little girl shot forward into safety. Wickerbottom helped her to her feet.

Back on dry ground, they discovered that the big man's name was Wolfgang. He was a circus strongman. The child was named Wendy, and she had a sister named Abigail who was currently indisposed but would be returning soon. Wendy would not say

where she would be coming from. Willow hoped Abigail hadn't run afoul of any tentacles.

Both of the newcomers were injured, and Wilson and Wickerbottom got busy mixing salves, heating water and generally bustling around.

Night was coming on fast. This fire was not nearly big enough. Wickerbottom was a wonderful woman but she was too picky about fire size and ever since Willow had pretended to burn herself the old lady had been overprotective to boot. No one was paying attention to her... she hadn't had a real fire in days... Willow slipped away.

Now THIS was a fire! Giant, hot, banishing the shadows and soothing the nerves. Why didn't anyone appreciate a good fire?

Willow dried herself by the fire. Once it was completely dry, the mud caked on her limbs grew powdery and could be brushed away.

Her legs had been gashed up pretty bad and Wilson had all the healing stuff. He was busy by the other fire (the weenie fire) at the moment, wrapping up Wolfgang's arms. He looked kind of frantic. She'd ask him for help later.

She had an unsatisfying meal of berries and chewy old bunny and lay on her side to watch her fire. No one seemed to be missing her. She might elect not to stick by their dumb tiny fires at night anymore. She didn't see why she should be deprived just because

other people didn't know how to deal with a real big fire without hurting themselves or getting it on their supplies.

She was just starting to doze off when she heard footsteps. She looked up. Wilson tossed his straw roll down on the ground. He caught sight of Willow. He stood there and tapped his fingertips together, hanging back a little bit.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

"Mind what?"

"If I'm here?"

"Oh!" The straw roll. She blinked. "You want to sleep over here?"

"Do you mind?" he repeated.

"Not at all!" Wilson was not overly fond of big fires... "But wouldn't you rather be over there with them?"

He shook his head. Willow felt warm, and not from the fire. "You can hang out with me whenever you want," she said.

"If you're sure you don't mind."

"I don't mind!"

He shook out his straw roll and laid it down a safe distance from the fire. He looked up. "Willow! Your legs!"

"Oh, yeah," she said.

He hustled over. "Stay where you are." He started applying stingy stuff to the backs of her calves. She dug her fingers into the

weave of her straw roll and stayed quiet. "There," he said finally.

"Try not to move them."

"Okay, Dr. Wilson."

"I'm not a doctor," he mumbled, lying down on the other side of the fire. He was frowning.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm all right."

"You sure?"

"Yes." He seemed mollified. Maybe he'd just been feeling ignored for some reason. "Thanks for asking."

"Good night," she said.

"Good night, Willow."

Willow had woken up, but it wasn't light out yet. The cool air on her arms told her what had happened. Her lovely fire had gotten too low for comfort. She took up some pinecones and some grass clippings too small to use, along with the tattered remains of Wilson's cruddy grass armor that he didn't want to wear anymore for some more substantial fuel, and she nursed her flame back to roaring health.

In the renewed light she could see Wilson curled up on the other side of the fire with his back to her. He was trembling. Poor guy. The freshly stoked fire should warm him back up.

She lay back down.

Wilson made a quiet but distinct noise of unhappiness. Was he awake? Should she say something?

The fire was nice and hot now but he was still shivering, and his breathing was fitful. She was just going to lie here and imagine horrible ways he could be dying unless she found out what was wrong. She called his name.

"Yes?" he mumbled.

"What's the matter?"

"Uh-" He hesitated, filling the silence with drawn, painful breaths.

"What is it?" she prodded. "Don't say 'nothing', I know you're not feeling good."

"Well-"

"That blue meat made you sick, didn't it?"

"It may have."

She sighed. "I told you not to eat that stuff. Do you need help?"

"No. I just need to sleep it off." He did sound miserably tired.

"All right. I'm right here."

"Okay."

She lay awake in the darkness. It was hard to sleep knowing that her friend was lying there suffering, even if it was his own stupid fault. "Are you awake?" she whispered, when too much time had passed.

"I can't sleep. My stomach hurts."

"Sheesh! I told you-"

"I know!" He sighed. "It could have worked..."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Yes." He sounded dubious

.She stared up into the sky. It was starless. Wilson could not suppress a few muffled pain sounds.

She rolled over to face him but he was still lying with his back to her. Her legs scraped against the straw mat as she moved and she winced. "We have to stay here a few days and rest anyway," she said. Wendy's legs had been torn up worse than hers...

"Right. How are your legs?"

"Not bad. That stuff you made really works. Maybe you should eat some of it?"

"I ran out." He rolled onto his back, staring up at the sky.

Willow hadn't learned much about poison in the Girl Scouts. Just poison ivy. "At least there's no poison ivy out here!"

"Huh. Yeah."

"You would probably rub it all over your face if there was," she joked.

He gnawed his lip. "What does poison ivy look like?"

"Leaves of three, let it be."

"Got it." He fell silent.

"So..." She cast about for something to distract him from his misery and to distract herself from the smarting in her legs he'd inadvertently reminded her of. She could ask about him. He probably liked to talk about himself... or maybe not... he hadn't

seemed happy when Wickerbottom had started asking innocent questions about his work.

She sure wasn't going to talk about herself. She flopped onto her back. Well, here was something to talk about... "Why are there no stars?"

"Clouds?" he guessed.

"But I can see the moon."

"Hm."

How much did she actually know about Wilson? She'd been spending every second with him for weeks, but they'd always spent that time talking about how not to die, or sharing a companionable silence. "You're... from Boston?"

"Near there. I guess you're... from..." he mumbled.

"I'm an American gal."

"Ah." She had to come up with something else to ask about.

"How did you figure out that salve?"

"I just thought of it," he said, with quiet satisfaction.

Weird ideas had been occurring to Willow too and she wasn't always sure they came from her... but Wilson liked thinking he was smart, so she wouldn't say anything.

"My work wasn't going well before I came here," he said suddenly. "I didn't have a thing to tell Wickerbottom when she asked me about my projects..." Unsure how to respond, she made a sympathetic noise. It was the reaction he seemed to expect. "But now... I can't even describe it!"

"Lots of ideas?"

"So many... they just come to me... I don't even have time to construct everything I could be constructing." He reflected on this quietly for a moment. "May I ask a question?" he said.

"Sure!" If she didn't like the question, she'd lie or evade.

"How did you get here?"

She considered this. "Maxwell," she answered.

"I hate that man."

"We're gonna find him and get him good," she said.

He fell silent. He had let her hide things from him as she liked. He hadn't even pried.

"Did you want to know anything else?" she asked.

"You don't seem to want to talk."

"No?"

"Not really."

Well, what could she say? It was true. He'd told her something sort of personal. Maybe she could think of something to tell him... she felt kind of bad, now that he'd noticed she didn't want to tell him stuff. "Maxwell told me," she said, "that there was a place where everyone needed fire."

"Did he? I'm going to kill him." He said it without venom, but Willow had a funny feeling he wasn't just saying it.

"Did Maxwell tell you something?" she asked.

"Yes." He did not say what. "Did you build a door here?"

"I did."

"You built it yourself?

""Yeah. I'm good at making stuff," she said. Better than him, probably, but why split hairs?

He nodded.

She began to pick at nearby blades of grass to give her hands something to do. She didn't like prolonged inactivity. "I don't like Maxwell," she said. "And there's a lot of terrible stuff here! But it's sort of nice, sometimes... to be somewhere with not a lot of people getting mad about stupid stuff... you know?"

"Mmhmm," Wilson mumbled.

She thought back to earlier that day. When she had started telling people what to do to help Wendy, everyone had listened, even though all of them were older than her. Even the men. Even though they didn't know her that well. And so far no one had yelled at her for starting a fire, even when she made them really big. "It's like a really... difficult vacation," she said.

"Mm." His voice was strained.

She glanced over at him. "Oh dear, you don't look well."

"It comes and goes."

"I hope it goes soon."

"Mm."

Willow reached out and took his hand, without the slightest thought of what was appropriate or awkward. His skin was clammy. Kinda gross, but she didn't let go. She heaved a sigh and

stared up into the sky. "I do wish there were stars! Darkness is boring!"

"Willow."

"Yeah?"

"Your arm is in the fire," he said.

Wilson was lying on the other side of the fire and, without thinking, she had put her arm through it to take his hand.

"I knew it," he said. "You're impervious to flame!"

"Fire is my friend," she said. "My friend wouldn't hurt me!" She squeezed his hand.

"That's incredible!"

"You're not going to experiment on me, are you?"

"I don't know! Am I?"

"Nope, you're not!"

"Okay."

Pale dawn light was filtering through the sky. Whew. Finally. Willow had never liked darkness, and here... there was something truly unpalatable about it. She heard a bird singing. She smelled pine trees and fresh grass and her wonderful big fire. As light diffused it and hid the lack of stars the sky became high, open, and free... And for the first time in a very long time, someone was holding her hand.

"Willow, uh-" Wilson's fingers unlaced from her own and he rolled over and up onto his hands and knees. She averted her eyes as he started to retch.

Well, nothing's perfect, she told herself.